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SUBJECT: BENIN: NGOS CRITICIZE GOVERNMENT ANTI-CORRUPTION EFFORT

¶1. SUMMARY: The Government of Benin (GOB) is drawing increasingly strident criticism for the dragging pace of its anti-corruption campaign; much of this criticism is aimed at President Yayi, who made the fight against corruption a centerpiece of his Presidential campaign. FONAC, a consortium of NGOs, has recently focused on unresolved malfeasance cases, some dating from 2006, and the high-level appointment of a controversial corruption suspect. END SUMMARY.

¶2. On 7 January 2010 Benin's Front for National Anti-Corruption Organizations (FONAC) held a widely-reported televised press conference to complain that President Yayi's government has failed to sanction to civil servants who have been implicated in corruption cases dating from 2006. FONAC's President, Maximillien Sossou-Gloh, insisted that President Yayi's government has made no significant progress in the fight against corruption, and that corruption is gaining ground in Benin in spite of Yayi's often-reiterated commitment to fighting it.

¶3. FONAC's Vice-President and spokesman, Jean Baptist Elias, listed 32 corruption cases involving civil servants from 2006 to 2009 (most presented by the government in 2007) which remain unresolved. FONAC's investigation at the Ministry of Civil Service in September 2009 found that no disciplinary committee had been established to handle these corruption cases, and no sanctions have been applied. However, Elias noted that the Minister of Justice reported these cases to the Prosecutor at the Court of Appeals of Cotonou, but that these cases remain in the hands of the court's investigative judges. Elias and Sossou-Gloh promised that FONAC will continue to follow the 32 corruption cases and insist upon their prosecution. They called on President Yayi to 'utilize the rest of his presidential mandate to prove his own good faith to curb corruption'.

¶4. Elias further complained that the former Manager of the public market management parastatal SOGEMA, Lucienne Carene Azonhoumon, was recently appointed Manager of Benin's Agency for the Promotion of Commercial Exchanges (ABEPEC) by the Minister of Commerce. Ms Azonhoumon allegedly embezzled CFA 100 mn (USD 200,000) while at SOGEMA. More broadly, Elias emphasized that GOB Ministers continue to appoint Chiefs of Staff who fail to meet seniority requirements specified by GOB decree.

¶5. COMMENT: FONAC's concerns are widely shared in principle, both among opinion leaders in Benin and the international donor community -- the energy with which President Yayi has pursued his widely-praised efforts against corruption appears to be waning as Benin's 2011 elections approach. Nonetheless, Benin continues to outperform its regional neighbors in this regard. END COMMENT.

KNIGHT